

# Swiss Armed Forces and the Challenges of the 21st Century

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**M**ILITARY transformation, which is an ongoing process in most Western countries, requires much effort and engenders significant debate and controversy. Despite its small, uniquely geopolitical sphere of influence and its traditional political neutrality, Switzerland finds itself engaged in military reform similar to that of other Western countries.

Throughout the Cold War, Switzerland maintained a defensive capability and, like no other country in Europe, prepared itself to defeat a Warsaw Pact offensive. The principles of the Swiss Armed Forces, by which the country gained independence in 1648, were applied to Swiss political, economic, and military structures.

After the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Switzerland mobilized its forces within 24 hours and fielded 650,000 soldiers in days. The forces were organized into 4 army corps equipped with 1,000 tanks, 1,500 armored personnel carriers, 1,300 105- and 155-millimeter artillery pieces, 1,500 antitank guns, and 2,000 anti-aircraft guns. In addition, Switzerland's air forces mobilized 300 aircraft. In total, 10 percent of the population was prepared to ardently defend Swiss territories.

As early as the 1950s, the national defense plan included destroying key strategic infrastructures and constructing private and public shelters to protect the population against nuclear, biological, and chemical attacks. All bridges, tunnels, and highways and most of the industrial base could be destroyed within a few hours with explosive charges pre-positioned in the immediate vicinity. Even 19th-century landmark tunnels—St. Gotthard and Simplon—would have been destroyed without any reservation.

The collapse of the Soviet Bloc and the emergence of asymmetrical threats caused the Swiss Government and its citizen-soldiers to reflect on a national defense strategy. The Armed Forces transformation has since become a subject of permanent discussion in the media and on the political scene.

## Armed Forces of '95

For centuries, Switzerland has been a multicultural democracy enjoying military neutrality.<sup>1</sup> This type of system made it difficult to initiate change. For example, Switzerland took more than 5 years to draft the first military reform program in response to the changing global environment. The military's size and its close integration into society contributed to delaying the reform, and political insecurity associated with a lengthy voting process concerning military issues exacerbated the situation. The process eventually resulted in the approval of sustaining 34 combat fighter planes and the refusal to commit troops under UN authority.

Political decisions made before the first military transformation initiative included troop cutbacks from 650,000 to 400,000 soldiers, basic training reduced from 17 to 15 weeks, and the mandatory retirement age lowered from 55 to 42. These measures did not take into consideration all the Armed Forces' requirements, however. They sacrificed the military's maneuver flexibility for the benefit of political consensus, which resulted in the reform campaign slogan: "More muscles and less fat." The Armed Forces of '95 reform led to an organization focused almost exclusively on high-intensity conflicts, leaving little flexibility with which to deal with

low-intensity and nonconventional threats.

The reform revealed the military's inability to transform and questioned the use of World War II-vintage doctrine. Since 1997, Switzerland has eliminated obsolete systems such as Bloodhound missiles, unmotorized artillery, and tanks without stabilized turrets, but true transformation of the Swiss military requires more fundamental reforms.

### Four Steps to Transformation

The Swiss Federal Council envisioned a four-step transformation process to take place between 1996 and 2003. The first step was to establish a long-term perspective with the 1996 Brunner Commission, which included politicians, economists, scientists, and other well-known people. The Commission's purpose was to analyze the geostrategic situation, identify potential threats for the next 20 to 25 years, and recommend future policy.

After 18 months of hearings and visits to numerous governmental organizations and foreign countries, the Commission delivered a 30-page report, which included 19 recommendations.<sup>2</sup> The report asked how the Swiss could best defend the country under then-current circumstances and still promote peace and democracy in the world. With this in mind, the Swiss know the importance of—

- Engagement in joint efforts for peace as an expression of visible solidarity.
- Cooperation with neighboring countries and other alliances working for peace, because the Swiss cannot counter all threats and dangers on their own.
- Continuous adaptation of security arrangements to meet the everchanging nature of global threats.
- Maintaining a militia (reserve component), even though reduced in size, that could be expanded at any time.

The *raison d'être* of neutrality is increasingly being questioned. Nevertheless, it retains its place in the Swiss collective mind. Federal authorities, therefore, should continue applying neutrality pragmatically and with flexibility. Neutrality must never adversely affect security. Neutrality has always been a means to promote Swiss interests, not an end in itself.

The second step was to define a national security strategy (NSS) adapted to contemporary and future threats. The June 1999 "Report of the Federal Council to the Federal Assembly on the Security Policy of Switzerland" (equivalent to the U.S. NSS) gave a precise scope and defined its strategy on a fundamental concept, reuniting actions, and principal behavior on the questions of the politics of security.<sup>3</sup>

The need to develop a new military doctrine is clear; it is fundamental for the "Swiss Armed Forces XXI" transformation. Presently, the Swiss Armed Forces are prepared to defend their homeland using reserve components, collaborating with neighboring countries on a limited basis, and deploying operational elements abroad. The security policy report calls for a military capable of providing security for its strategic environment, a credible force that is ready to engage, and one that is capable of supporting a deployed national military force integrated with a larger multinational effort. Switzerland should prepare itself for a war against an identified enemy with known capabilities and adopt a more global perspective in which only a small military force would be required.

The Swiss Armed Forces received three strategic missions that had significant changes from the 1990 NSS draft, including the following:

- Peace support and crisis management. The military became a key component in preserving Swiss interests. By participating in international peace support and crisis management, Switzerland committed to the stability of the strategic environment by deploying military assets for stabilization and international crisis management operations under mandates covered by international law, preparing for such operations in multinational or bilateral cooperation with other armed forces.

- Protection and defense (homeland defense). This mission protects the population with a major conventional force. Below the threshold of war, the Swiss Armed Forces protect strategically important areas and contribute to security and stability within Switzerland and the region. In case of a military threat, the Armed Forces are to defend the population, the territory, and the airspace and provide maximum freedom of action for the government. If necessary, federal authorities can authorize the Armed Forces to conduct defensive operations as part of an alliance with another state.

- Prevention and management of existential dangers by participating in disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, and civil security operations (such as protecting specific installations and easing the burden on the police or the Frontier Guards Corps). The Armed Forces will have only a subsidiary role, with operational responsibility remaining with civilian authorities. The Armed Forces would be used primarily when civilian assets are insufficient. The armed forces become part of the comprehensive and flexible security cooperation.<sup>4</sup>

US Air Force



A Swiss soldier briefs Ukrainian delegation members on a telephone microwave link during the U.S. European Command-sponsored exercise Combined Endeavor 2004, Lager Aulenbach, Germany, 17 May 2004.

The third step was to conduct a legal review with the support of Parliament—as well as the population—to allow for a flexible transformation.

The fourth step was to develop a new doctrine and corresponding force structure based on the 2004 Armed Forces White Paper.<sup>5</sup> In the security policy report, the Federal Assembly opted for several political choices to lead the Swiss Armed Forces XXI transformation to—

- ▣ Construct future Armed Forces on the principles of a militia system. Mandatory military service is anchored in the federal constitution, as well as Swiss society itself.<sup>6</sup>

- ▣ Support the new engagement policy. Active units should be available at all times. The increase in active units is a sine qua non for the success of the reform.

- ▣ Guarantee good military basic training. Improving the Armed Forces' multifunctional and international interoperability would increase the number of professional soldiers (instructors).<sup>7</sup>

To secure the Armed Forces transformation, Chief of the General Staff Lieutenant General Hans-Ulrich Scherrer imposed a new philosophy cemented by U.S. Army General Gordon R. Sullivan's "doctrine and design," imperatives: quality people, leader development, modern equipment, doctrine, force mix, and training.<sup>8</sup>

Militia officers and Swiss Department of Defense professional officers and civilians say the success of Armed Forces XXI will be based on the ability to operate under an autonomous national or international command structure. But, Armed Forces can be international partners only if they are credible and if credibility is based on—

- ▣ The ability to identify common threat or equivalent readiness standards with benchmarking force-on-force exercises with foreign formations and a relative certification process. The goal is to attain interoperability.

- ▣ The capability to respond after an initial warning to a threat. A risk analysis, similar to those of other neutral countries, shows that conventional war is only one potential scenario and that other important asymmetrical threats should be taken into consideration.

- ▣ The capability to cooperate with other Armed Forces while helping stabilize the Swiss strategic environment by promoting peace.

Armed Forces XXI strategic doctrine brings a different concept into the sectors where the means must be engaged. Being exclusively centered on the national territory for centuries, the Swiss Armed Forces must distinguish three zones:

1. The strategic environment (essentially in Europe) in which Swiss Armed Forces contribute to



US Army

Soldiers of the 503d Infantry (Airborne) move toward a Swiss Air Force AS-332 Super Puma that will extract them from Heritage Drop Zone near Klina, Kosovo, during Rapid Guardian 03.

promoting peace and obtaining interoperability with other Armed Forces.

2. The operative terrain, where Armed Forces XXI should cooperate with the concerned countries (in the case of preparation) and after the decision of the political authorities (in the case of defense).

3. The regional area, where Swiss Armed Forces are free to prepare the country's defense using existing infrastructure.

The Armed Forces must perform their required tasks with a \$3 billion annual defense budget. They must make up lost ground in the area of armament investment because last decade's budget cuts were made more quickly than they could be implemented. Consequently, the proportion of the defense budget spent on operating costs rose while arms procurement dropped.<sup>9</sup>

## Contours of Armed Forces XXI

Elements of the national strategy that deal with politics and security had to overcome opposition in the Parliament and with the public. On 26 November 2000, 62.5 percent of the population opposed a socialists initiative asking for a 50 percent defense cut to pay for social programs. On 10 June 2001, 51 percent of the population opposed a double referendum by nationalists and antimilitarists against the arming of soldiers in missions abroad and against in-

creased military training cooperation. On 2 December 2001, 78 percent of the population defeated a proposal to eliminate the Armed Forces. On 3 March 2002, with 54.6 percent of the vote, Switzerland approved the people's initiative for Switzerland's membership in the UN.<sup>10</sup> The votes show distrust and doubt concerning the Armed Forces and the Federal Council's "security through cooperation." At the same time, however, the military has the support of the majority of citizens. The Federal Assembly accepted the transformation and the Armed Forces White Paper in September 2002, foreseeing personnel strength decreasing from 400,000 to 200,000 and reserve forces decreasing to an end-state strength of 80,000.

**Readiness.** The structure of the Swiss Armed Forces can be described as basic. As soon as there is a specific task demanding operational readiness, the brigades and the territorial regions can be structured to undertake the task. The operational structure will then transition to a core mission-fulfillment process. Mission-fulfillment leads from the Armed Forces' resources to specific required missions, including:

- Generating basic readiness based on general staff directives. Each service generates basic readiness. The Army attaches reserve component battalions to brigade and territorial region commands for

training purposes. The Air Force attaches reserve components to air base commands.

- Generating operational readiness. As soon as there is a specific mission, the Armed Forces command staff issues an operational order, allowing the single service commander to validate the unit's ability to meet mission requirements.

- Implementing the operation plan. The Armed Forces command staff commands and controls the implementation of the operation plan by the single services.

The force structure will change from 9 infantry divisions, 4 territorial divisions, 2 territorial brigades, 5 tank brigades, and 2 fortress brigades for a total of 10 brigades, including 7 infantry, 2 armored, 1 logistic, 1 special operations forces regiment, and 3 military police battalions. Ten percent of the military forces must serve a mandatory 10-month period in the infantry to ensure troops are available to support civil authorities.

**Force generation.** Predeployment training varies in length based on the mission and enables operational readiness according to missions and performances. The consequence is a system of graduated readiness, which provides the differing resource potential for the respective time segments.

Military conscripts who complete military service within a single period are assigned to special standby units after basic training and are immediately available. The next availability group includes military professionals and militia personnel who commit themselves to military service for a limited period (contracted military personnel) as well as civilian employees. (Their numbers are limited.)

A second priority for immediate response will be deploying troops engaged in training. Only troops in their final phase of basic unit training or engaged in refresher courses will be available. Their units will be capable of executing a broader scope of missions including support operations or reinforcement of the units already committed.

After a few months, all units in refresher courses will also be available. In addition, these troops will be able to conduct area protection operations. Units for international peace support and crisis management, which consist of military professionals, contracted military personnel, and (voluntary) single-term conscripts, will require a medium period of preparation.

After several months of preparation, reservists will also be available. To allow time for their mobilization process, these units must be activated as soon as possible. Longer periods of training will make it

possible to increase the staying power for area protection. If the security situation in Europe changed so radically that a concrete threat against Switzerland became acute, Swiss Armed Forces would have to be adapted to the situation. This process is called force generation.

**Head of the Armed Forces.** Currently, the Swiss military is shifting from the *primus inter pares* command concept to a single military command concept. A single commander will be responsible for the development and command of the Army and the Air Force, the senior training command, and the general staff. The commander will hold the rank of lieutenant general but should not be confused with the supreme commander, who is chosen by Parliament only during wartime.

**Training.** The aim for military training is operational readiness. The content of all training activity is directed toward the Armed Forces' core capabilities. New training requirements stemming from technological advances, higher standards and new command and control doctrine at the tactical level demand basic training to be substantially extended to 21 weeks of school for combat and combat support troops and 18 weeks for combat service support troops. This additional time will allow collective training to occur.

During the six or seven annual refresher courses of 3 to 4 weeks, combined arms warfare will be built up so brigade exercises can be held periodically. This number represents the optimum compromise between what is a necessity and what is realistically achievable given the current social political climate. **MR**

## NOTES

1. Neutrality carries a number of legal obligations, which the Hague Accords of 1907 defined, on the rights and duties of neutral states in land and naval warfare and the precedents set in international law.
2. Report of the Study Commission on Strategic Issues (Brunner Commission), Berne, Switzerland, 26 February 1998, on-line at <[www.tagessanzeiger.ch/steh/bericht\\_e.htm](http://www.tagessanzeiger.ch/steh/bericht_e.htm)>, accessed 9 August 2004.
3. See on-line <[www.vbs.ch](http://www.vbs.ch)>, accessed 9 August 2004.
4. Report of the Federal Council to the Federal Assembly on the Security Policy of Switzerland, 7 June 1999, 45.
5. Plan Directeur de l'Armée/Armeeleitbild, Berne, 24 October 2002.
6. Swiss Federal Constitution, Article 58, states that Switzerland's Armed Forces will be militia organized.
7. Multifunctionality implies the ability to accomplish several different missions. The Armed Forces as a whole are multifunctional; however, multifunctionality covering the full spectrum of missions is neither possible nor necessary at the individual soldier or unit level. In adopting the concept and increasing the degree of interoperability, the Armed Forces creates the necessary preconditions for multinational collaboration.
8. GEN Gordon R. Sullivan with Michael V. Harper, *Hope is Not a Method: Business Leaders Can Learn from America's Army* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997).
9. The 2001 armaments program includes the procurement of equipment valued at approximately \$650 million.
10. The President of the Swiss Confederation and the Federal Chancellor signed the request for Swiss membership into the UN on 20 June 2002. The membership request contained a declaration in which Switzerland accepted the obligations contained in the UN Charter and a declaration of Switzerland's of continued neutrality. The General Assembly duly admitted Switzerland in a resolution adopted by acclamation on 10 September 2002. Switzerland became the 190th member of the UN.

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